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“If I Could Only Win Your Love”: Lyrical Analysis of the Sacred and Secular Songs of the  
Louvin Brothers

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Appalachian Studies  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in Appalachian Studies

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by  
Aynsley Porchak  
May 2020

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Keywords: Traditional Appalachian music, Charlie Louvin, Ira Louvin, Appalachian religion

## ABSTRACT

“If I Could Only Win Your Love”: Lyrical Analysis of the Sacred and Secular Songs of the

Louvin Brothers

by

Aynsley Porchak

In this thesis, I demonstrate how analysis through literary criticism can provide a commentary on Appalachian song. While literary analysis of both sacred and secular song lyrics is an approach that is largely overlooked in this region’s traditional music, it nonetheless provides insightful perspective on the art form itself. As I argue, one particular duo of Appalachian musicians, the Louvin Brothers, are uniquely suited to this inquiry. I propose that themes that are found in many of the Louvin Brothers’ songs, such as love, acceptance, and rejection, create a bridge between the historically documented theoretical gap between bluegrass and country music’s sacred and secular songs. I document how the Louvins successfully navigated these traditionally separate subgenres using these common subjects while offering a commentary on musical history, their own upbringing, and religion.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my parents, to my chair, to my committee, to my love—thank you for your patience.

*Soli Deo Gloria.*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	3
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	5
2. “THE CHRISTIAN LIFE”: SACRED SONGS OF THE LOUVIN BROTHERS .....	22
3. “I CAN’T KEEP YOU IN LOVE WITH ME”: SECULAR SONGS OF THE LOUVIN BROTHERS .....	41
4. CONCLUSION .....	57
WORKS CITED.....	60
VITA .....	63

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In a 2010 interview with *American Songwriter*, the respected Appalachian country music singer and songwriter Charlie Louvin was asked about the secret to musical longevity. Louvin candidly stated, “Well, I think that that’s one of the reasons that most Louvin Brothers songs have lived more than fifty years—because they challenge you” (Waterman). Nearly sixty years after their peak, the Louvin Brothers are still considered to be one of the most influential and revolutionary duos in the fields of bluegrass and country music. While the brothers’ career was cut short by conflicting personalities and an untimely death, their music still retains great relevance through rediscovered, remastered, and revitalized classic recordings, championed by a handful of traditionalist artists and bands who were inspired by the duo’s harmonic mastery and poignant songwriting. Few country music partnerships have had the inventiveness of the Louvins, and it could be argued that even fewer had such a staggering impact upon both their peers and the whole of the recording industry. *The Grove Dictionary of American Music* claims that the Louvin Brothers were “probably the greatest traditional country duo in history” and Vince Gill’s statement that “you can’t find anybody [in country music], I don’t think, that was not inspired by them” speak volumes about the level of respect that the brothers obtained over their outstanding careers (Malone and Lis, Louvin and Whitmer 298).

However, there is an aspect of this iconic duo’s work that has yet to be examined. As Charlie Louvin alluded, the Louvin Brothers’ songs are not only riveting, but also thought-provoking upon close examination of the lyrics. Some of the Louvins’ greatest hits, such as “Satan Is Real,” “When I Stop Dreaming,” and “I Don’t Believe You’ve Met My Baby” show a side of Appalachian music that is steeped in the balladry of the Scots-Irish settlers, the

materializing genres of bluegrass and country music that were just starting to reach their peak, and the Sacred Harp shape-note singing traditions that were prevalent around the Louvins' Alabama home. It is this blend of influences that combined not only to make them the musical powerhouses that achieved thirteen hits on the *Billboard* country music chart and five singles in the country music Top Ten, but also that made them an intriguing case study for this particular avenue of research.

I became familiar with the music of the Louvin Brothers through my studies at East Tennessee State University. I pursued two majors: my primary focus was the Bluegrass, Old-Time, and Country Music Studies program, but when I was in my second year of studies, I decided to add a second major in English. Both these degrees proved to be quite influential to this thesis and my career as a whole. As a Bluegrass, Old-Time, and Country Music Studies student, I had the opportunity to perform in the ETSU Bluegrass Pride Band for four years, which gave me a deeper understanding of musical techniques, genre themes, and historical figures in each of the titular genres. One of these early American musical groups that I was introduced to was the duo of the Louvin Brothers. The band of students listened to and learned to perform several numbers from the Louvins' catalog of songs as a way of tightening vocal harmonies and learning about previous genre innovators. While I had never heard the Louvins before my time at ETSU, I became fascinated with their dazzling harmonies and striking songwriting. When the time came to prepare a thesis, I found that this topic filled a niche within Appalachian Studies research, and I began to apply my English degree and my knowledge of literary criticism to listen even more carefully to the lyrical content that had so sparked my interest.

As I listened to these talented artists, I was surprised and intrigued by what I found. The Louvin Brothers' song catalog provides a thought-provoking commentary on many subjects, but I found that there were three primary issues that consistently appeared within their lyrics. In fact, these three themes surfaced in some way in many of their most popular songs—love, acceptance, and both the fear of and the act of rejection. However, the context in which they appeared proved to be even more important to me. Despite the contrast of their sacred and secular music, these same topics appear similarly in both. I will argue that while secular and sacred music contain defined musical contrasts, the lyrics of the Louvin Brothers show similar themes across these two genres. An examination of Louvins' lyrical themes through the dual lenses of both their own upbringing and regional Appalachian religion shows how certain songs can draw upon the topics in contrasting ways, and through close reading and lyrical analysis, I suggest that several of the Louvins' hits point to the same underlying subject matter, effectively crossing the thematic, musical, and presentational boundaries between sacred and secular subgenres.

In this thesis, I begin by familiarizing the reader with the theoretical perimeters of my study, as well as situating my research within the larger whole of Appalachian Studies and introducing the forms of literary criticism that I will apply to illuminate the Louvin Brothers' song catalog. Chapter One prefaces the lyrical investigation by tracing the development of Charlie and Ira Louvin's careers from their humble beginnings to their eventual status as popular recording artists in an attempt to provide historical context that will inform my analytical discussion. In Chapters Two and Three, I take turns analyzing selected song lyrics that correspond to the themes of love, acceptance, and rejection within sacred and secular songs, respectively. I apply literary criticism to show the subtexts within the songs and explain their importance to the brothers' lives while also showing the connections with their topical song



partners. Through this analysis, I show the ties between the sacred and secular song lyrics in country and bluegrass music and show how the Louvin Brothers pioneered an approach to genre-crossing that was quite unusual for their time. The final chapter in my thesis examines the greater impact of Charlie and Ira Louvin within the greater whole of traditional American music, summarizes my findings, and encourages further research of these topics.

To create my analysis of the Louvin Brothers' songs, I first established the framework of my research. The overwhelming majority of the duo's sacred and secular songs referred to the topics of love, acceptance, and the fear of or the act of rejection. The transference of these themes across the subgenres' divide, long kept separate, intrigued me, as it contrasts vividly with several aspects of early country and bluegrass music. Bluegrass historian Neil Rosenberg describes this concept in his book *Bluegrass: A History*, stating that most bluegrass or country musicians from the 1940s through to the 1960s sought to highlight the thematic, musical, and presentational division of these themes. He notes the separation that would occur between the regular, secular songs that most artists would construct a set of, and their careful introduction of a gospel or "spiritual" number, attempting to set up the dichotomy between the two styles and requesting the audience members to listen carefully (Rosenberg 236-37). Stylistic musical variances were present as well, such as different instrumentation and utilizations of more complete harmony stacks in contrast to the two- and three-part harmonies that were standard on many of the secular songs (Rosenberg 236). Naturally, the thematic elements also varied considerably, with the secular songs often containing lyrics that depicted drinking, murder, and both emotional and physical love in stark contrast to sacred songs centered around prayer, holiness, and the love of God. For these reasons, the mid-20th century country music industry frowned upon too much interaction between "holy" and "common" musical forms, and even the

single most influential platform for country and bluegrass music during this time, the Grand Ole Opry, specifically limited the amount of gospel music performed during certain shows because of the nature of the show's sponsors, which did not always fit the image portrayed in the songs' lyrical content (Wilmeth 40). However, author Thomas Wilmeth adamantly depicts the rebellion of the Louvin Brothers against the carefully maintained chasm between sacred and secular subgenres. Wilmeth states in *The Music of the Louvin Brothers: Heaven's Own Harmony* that the Louvin Brothers, who were not accepted by the traditional gospel community for dabbling in secular music and instrumentation and who frequently made country audiences "uncomfortable" with their references to sin and guilt within religious pieces, chose to maintain their individuality nonetheless (37). During their personal appearances, Charlie and Ira Louvin performed both sacred and secular songs equally with little regard to the established sacred and secular subgenres in a way that rebelled against the industry's "established image[s]" and even composed many of their songs with "themes familiar to gospel songs ... applied to a completely secular situation" (40, 43).

With this in mind, I determined to isolate the topics that appeared in the Louvins' song lyrics and select sources that presented supportive perspectives and approaches accordingly. From these resources, I selected three forms of literary criticism to inform my analysis of Charlie and Ira Louvin's songwriting. The most commonly utilized of these three criticisms is the method called "close reading." It is one of the most basic forms of literary analysis, and stems from the New Criticism and Deconstructionist movements. Close reading uses the reader's basic deductions to find the implied cause and effect of a given statement, event, or object. *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* defines it as a form of literary criticism "in which the poem or literary text is treated as a self-sufficient verbal artifact—a unique and

privileged source of meaning and value” (Grodén 528). The priority is given to the text itself and whatever meanings the reader may derive, rather than the influences of culture or history. I will be using close reading as the first level of criticism in Chapters 2 and 3 to show the impact of lyrical import upon the listener. As well, I will draw upon the theory of new historicism, which author and literary critic Peter Barry defines as “a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period . . . in which . . . texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other” (Barry 173). Formed in the 1970s by critics such as J. W. Lever and fully developed and defined in the 1980s by Stephen Greenblatt, new historicism was developed as a reaction to the practical theory of close reading as a way to look past the words on paper and instead see them within the greater context of the modern times. This particular form of theory will be valuable for my examinations of song lyrics (which I will be using as the “literary” text) while contrasting them against biographical works (which will represent the “non-literary” text).

While both of these forms of literary criticism are undoubtedly essential to this thesis, another analysis creates another crucial facet for this work. The very nature of the music that I am investigating requires an examination of the applied thematic elements, and to accomplish this, I decided to select a form of analysis that best incorporates religious themes. While religious literary analysis is not widely acknowledged, it is nonetheless present in modern criticism. Nathan A. Scott, Jr.’s 1953 article “The Relation of Theology to Literary Criticism” was one of the first pieces to propose the themes that later critics such as P. Joseph Cahill and Luke Ferretter would develop (Cahill 51). According to Dennis Taylor in *Seeing into the Life of Things: Essays on Literature and Religious Experience*, this form of criticism “discuss[es] religious or spiritual dimensions in works of literature” and draws out the references lifted from the Bible or similar

holy texts (3). As I determine the parallel themes between the sacred and secular lyrics of the Louvin Brothers, I will be using religious literary criticism to provide insight into the allusions and iconography that the duo so frequently and vividly used.

I also was struck with the lack of research on lyrical analysis within ethnomusicological studies, and I determined to create a list of references that would span a wide range of perspectives and years. I reference three works as biographical sources to inform my discussion of the Louvins' lives. Author Charles Wolfe chronicled the Louvin Brothers' career through painstaking historical research and interviews with Charlie himself to create his 1996 book *In Close Harmony: The Story of the Louvin Brothers*. Thomas Wilmeth produced a volume two years later, entitled *The Music of the Louvin Brothers: Heaven's Own Harmony*, notable for its extensive discography and analytical perspective. More recently, Benjamin Whitmer had collaborated with Charlie Louvin to publish the duo's life story in *Satan Is Real: The Ballad of the Louvin Brothers*, which was released in 2013, shortly after Louvin's death, and depicted the musicians in vivid detail, spreading new light on the stories that had been circulating for decades. I supplemented these three books with several additional individual interviews with Charlie Louvin to provide insight into his life after the brothers disbanded. Journal articles from American music scholars such as Bill Malone, Michael Grimshaw, and Charles Wilson Reagan explore the selected songs' interconnected themes, while seventeen songs from Charlie and Ira Louvin's celebrated albums provide a basis for literary analysis. I analyze the presence of selected core lyrical themes in the lives of Ira and Charlie Louvin, the topical impact upon their works, and their navigation of the balance of sacred and secular songs to provide an original and modern perspective on these topics.

In the 2012 biography *Satan Is Real: The Ballad of the Louvin Brothers*, famed singer-songwriter Kris Kristofferson states “the legendary Louvin Brothers’ hauntingly beautiful Appalachian blood harmony is truly one of the treasures of American music” (Louvin and Whitmer i). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the Louvins’ songwriting and themes, it is helpful to first examine their lives and culture. Charlie and Ira Loudermilk were born in Henagar, Alabama within the southern region of Appalachia as designated by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). The brothers were born to Colonel Monero Allen and Georgianne (née Wooten) Loudermilk, a farmer and preacher’s daughter respectively. The Loudermilks were cotton farmers, and each of the family’s six children learned to work in the fields from an early age (Wilmeth 3). Charlie Louvin has reflected in several interviews and books that his father drove his siblings quite hard, giving examples of how Loudermilk would give his son or daughter that picked the most cotton that day a five-dollar bill, and then stating that if they did not meet that same quota the next day, they would be beaten (Louvin and Whitmer 11). Colonel Loudermilk was known for his fiery temper from his own drunken and abusive upbringing, a quality that would later be passed on to his son, Ira, and whose character came to be alluded to in several of the brothers’ later songs.

Charlie and Ira began learning old English ballads from their mother, and they crafted their harmonies to fit around the traditional songs. According to scholar Thomas Wilmeth, the Loudermilk family was also involved in the Sacred Harp singing style, a derivative of the shape-note form of musical transmission that was particularly popular in the Sand Mountain, Alabama area in the early 1900s (Wilmeth 4). Author Charles Reagan Wilson refers to this form of singing as an art that played a key role in defining the region’s “spirituality,” and Charlie and Ira certainly exemplified this mindset in their own music (75). The boys had no formal musical

training, and thus they improvised a style of harmony singing that borrowed techniques from the shape-note singing meetings while not relying on the tenets of standard harmony, instead crossing and meeting vocal lines in a fresh and captivating way. As the brothers began to hone their skills, their father took notice, and he drew his bashful sons out with impromptu performances at the local Sacred Harp singings and community gatherings—a tactic which made the duo more comfortable performing for audiences (Wilmeth 5). Charlie and Ira eagerly listened to brother duets such as the Blue Sky Boys, the Monroe Brothers, and the Delmore Brothers, as well as Grand Ole Opry stars like Roy Acuff on the radio. While the brothers felt that they were vocally able to compete with the leading brother duets of the day, they lacked instrumental skills and decided to learn guitar and mandolin in order to make themselves more marketable and successful. They also changed their name from Loudermilk to “Louvin” (an amalgamation of names developed while brainstorming one night) to further this goal (Wilmeth 12).

Charlie and Ira’s ultimate ambition was to play the Grand Ole Opry stage, which contrasted vividly with their father’s goal to see the boys performing songs of faith for their small rural community. In order to make ends meet, the brothers set aside the puritanical values that they so frequently sang about to perform at local carnivals and pool halls, and eventually they gained some recognition winning a Chattanooga, Tennessee, radio competition that offered a weekly radio show as a first-place prize. Soon afterward, Smilin’ Eddie Hill, the station manager at WMPS in Memphis, offered the Louvins a job on yet another country music radio station, billing them as “the world’s best duet” (Louvin and Whitmer 88). The duo spent the next few years recording sides for Apollo, MGM, Acuff-Rose, and Decca, while performing on various local barn dances. Their arguably biggest break came when they signed a contract with Ken Nelson and Capitol Records in 1952 to record gospel material with one of the industry’s

leading guitar sideman, Chet Atkins. In 1955, Charlie and Ira Louvin played the Grand Ole Opry stage after being introduced by their boyhood hero, Roy Acuff. Their career skyrocketed, and musicians such as Johnny Cash and Elvis Presley became fans of the duo's distinctive harmonic arrangements and emotive songwriting.

Charlie and Ira Louvin's striking vocal blend resulted from a combination of influences found within their cultural traditions. Henagar, Alabama, is centered within a hotbed of Appalachian musical customs, and the brothers readily accredited the formation of their vocal style to their family's involvement in Sacred Harp singing, coupled with their mother's love of ancient Scots-Irish ballads. An examination of this community-driven music explains the impact that Sacred Harp shape-note singing had on the Louvin Brothers and also reveals its importance to Appalachia.

Sacred Harp singing is a derivative of the shape-note singing mode of transference and construction of melodies. Based upon the concept that notes printed in different shapes are easier for beginning singers to read than theory-based standard notation, shape-note singing utilizes different syllables and pairs them with distinctively formed notes to guide singers to associate them with tonal differences. This formatting of shaped notes, while seemingly complicated, was in fact an effort to facilitate faster learning from unskilled singers, which led to the gradual implementation of the teaching technique in America during the 1700s. By the 1800s, the music was a valuable social art form, and collections of songs in tunebooks such as Ananias Davidson's 1816 volume *Kentucky Harmony*, Andrew Law's book entitled *The Musical Primer*, and perhaps the most well-known and beloved out of all of the songbooks—*The Sacred Harp*—had become treasured volumes in the homes of many churchgoers. However, *The Sacred Harp* remained unique in that it not only spawned a specific style of singing (which incorporated four-note

transcriptions, shunned instrumentation, and utilized a powerful full-voice singing style), but also became one of the most enduring vocal forms in the Baptist congregations found in lower Appalachian states such as Alabama. As Ira Louvin learned to harmonize with Charlie, he chose to simulate the multiple harmony parts in the Sacred Harp tradition with his unconventional alternation between the tenor and baritone harmony parts (Louvin and Whitmer 40). This, combined with the powerful full-voice projection of the lyrics also drawn from their shape-note singing roots, created the distinct sound that audiences could readily identify and ensured that they were distinguishable from many of their contemporaries.

While Charlie and Ira Louvin were certainly influenced musically by the Sacred Harp songs that they were exposed to in their youth, they also heard thematic content from these songs that they drew upon for the rest of their songwriting career. The classic tunebook served as a collection of many canonical shape-note hymns, and the topics that they covered spanned from the joyful celebration of the Christian who has gained salvation to the guilt-ridden backslider lost in sin. From the over 500 pages in *The Sacred Harp*, three hymns in particular typify the primary elements of this style of shape-note singing, and through lyrical analysis, show a progression through the Christian life that the Louvin Brothers would have been quite familiar with.

“Idumea” is one of the most recognizable pieces from the shape-note singing tradition, thanks to its inclusion in both the *Southern Harmony* and *Missouri Harmony* tunebooks before *The Sacred Harp* was published. It was also featured in the award-winning film *Cold Mountain* in 2003, which revived an interest in shape-note singing through its soundtrack. Its thematic content varies noticeably from the previous two hymns in that its lyrics do not contain positive statements of belief, but rather existential questioning of the human condition and fate. The first verse begins with the line “And am I born to die?” effectively opening the song with the



haunting question that sets the tone for the rest of the piece (1). The speaker considers the possibility of life after death and shows uncertainty in the “world unknown” that they will eventually join (3). The song portrays the two possibilities that face mortals—either the “woe” and damnation that comes from living according to the world, or the “eternal happiness” and salvation that reward a faithful Christian (10). However, “Idumea” portrays a speaker who seems initially unsure of whether their decision to follow Christ will ensure that they go to heaven, before the final verse indicates their regained faith that God will raise them with all believers on the Judgement Day to see “the Judge with glory crowned” at the “trumpet sound” (14, 12). The contrast from the questioning beginning of the song to the exclamatory final lines indicates a theological and mental transformation, and the speaker’s conviction of God’s power and justice after death ends the song victoriously.

A differing depiction of God is found in the hymn “America.” Instead of the mighty all-powerful God from “Idumea,” he is portrayed as a kind and gracious heavenly father. The speaker frames the song in the first line as a song of “praise,” and proceeds to introduce the primary qualities that they see in God within each of the three verses (1). While the first stanza establishes God as merciful and slow to anger, the next praises his abundant and seemingly inconceivable grace, and the final introduces the theme of God as loving forgiver (2-3, 7-8, 10-12). However, the speaker takes care to acknowledge that while they use the image of God as a gentle and forgiving father, he does rely upon his power and might to “subdue” his children’s sins (9). This word choice alludes to a concept of God’s power effectively squelching the desire to sin and simply removing temptation rather than relying on the person’s individual conscious decision to resist the temptation, providing a theological counterpoint to personal responsibility. This description also portrays God as the mediator between his children and their sins, rather

than Christ, despite the fact that Jesus traditionally acts in this role in New Testament scriptures such as 1 Timothy 2:5, which states “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (King James Version). Nevertheless, the two sides of God as benevolent father yet powerful protector prove to be a theme that appears quite frequently within sacred lyrics, and likewise appear in several hymns within *The Sacred Harp* tunebook. The song ends with one last fatherly reference in the form of a biblical reference to Psalm 103:12, stating that God will lovingly discard his children’s guilt as “far as the east is from the west” (11-12). “America” gives singers and listeners hope that their sins will be overcome and that their heavenly father will gently guide them through life in his great love.

“Primrose Hill” shows the certainty of the individual who believes in God’s salvation. The song begins with the speaker stating that they will no longer fear or despair over their life when they “read” their “title” (or deed) “to mansions in the skies,” or when they know that they have received God’s salvation (1-2). The persona continues their fearless assertions, claiming that they could even face Satan’s wrath with a smile under the knowledge of God’s protection (10). The speaker calls God “my all” and expresses implicit confidence in him despite the “storms of sorrow” and “wave[s] of trouble” that may face them (17, 15, 23). The language of the song sets up the vast contrast between the two major locations in the lyrics—the imagery of the serene heaven uses such words as “rest,” “peaceful,” and “home,” while the opposing, warlike, hellish world is depicted alternatively with “fier [sic] darts,” “frowning,” and “rage” (22, 24, 18, 9, 11, 10). As well, great care is taken in the lyrics to consistently refer to God and his kingdom of the heavenly skies, while similarly pairing references to Satan and the Earth as the devil’s domain. However, the peace that “Primrose Hill” presents as an alternative to this earthly disorder can be enjoyed only through denying the world and obtaining a “title” to the

heavenly mansion in the first line or becoming a Christian (1). The song's structure shows the confidence of the speaker in their salvation through the series of certain declarations (unlike "Idumea," which instead questions the troubling fate of humankind) and the narrator maintains a positive outlook on their future throughout. While the hymn ultimately evidences that Christianity does not prevent the worldly suffering that does face believers, "Primrose Hill" also presents the perspective that faith in heavenly protection both in this life and the next makes these trials endurable.

These three hymns suggest a progression of events within the Christian life. In the first hymn, "Idumea," the narrator raises questions about mortality and the ultimate fate of their soul before regaining confidence in God's ability to raise them from death on the judgement day. This faith therefore gives them the reassurance of the persona in "America," who maintains that God provides them with the love, grace, and mercy that they need to face their daily existence on earth. Finally, "Primrose Hill" discusses the life after death that the speaker believes awaits them and comforts the believer through its depictions of the peace that will await them if they maintain their faith. Tracing the life of a believer through these hymns provides insight into the beliefs of the Louvins' church community and the later formation of the brothers' sacred compositions.

While Charlie and Ira Louvin were hugely influenced by their father's involvement in the local Sacred Harp singings, the credit for their musical development must also be shared with their mother Georgianna's enthusiasm for traditional British balladry. Georgianna's father was a Baptist preacher within the northeast Alabama community of Henagar, and in keeping with the family's English heritage, Charlie and Ira's mother taught them the same songs that she sang as a girl. The young Louvins learned multiple selections which they would later implement into their repertoire, such as "Mary of the Wild Moor," which proved to be a song that would stay with the

brothers throughout their career. The importance of songs like this particular example reveal just how crucial the musical traditions from the Scots-Irish were to Appalachian communities like the Louvins’.

“Mary of the Wild Moor” is a song which was originally printed as a British “broadside ballad” in the early 1800s. The lyrics tell the melancholy tale of a needy young woman estranged from her family. While she is clearly more concerned for the welfare of her child than herself, Mary is also close to death, and when she arrives at her parents’ house, crying over the noise of the wind for her father to save her, he does not hear her voice (5, 13). In the sequential verses, the unfortunate girl’s father finds her lying dead near the door, with her child just alive (19). Both Mary’s father and her child pass away from their loss, and the song ends with a somber reminder of the girl who was once a carefree and beautiful bride and her tragic end which haunts the village (25, 26, 29).

This particular ballad is constructed in standard ballad fashion, which relies on sequential verses to depict an incident with an alternating chorus to break up the narrative. However, the Louvins chose to insert two instrumental breaks after the third and sixth verses, interstitial interludes that act to provide a pause for reflection to the listener similar to the function of line breaks in poetry. To this point, it is also quite evident to observe that several components of the ballad allude to literary conventions. The doleful subject matter follows the pattern of many songs and pieces of literature also situated within the Romantic period of the late-1700s to mid-1800s, which often appealed to an audience’s imagination through the liberal use of pathos. Themes such as nature, remembrance of the past, and human reason and consciousness were all found in pieces of high literature and poetry from this time period, and the masses were being entertained with such popular literature as the penny dreadful, designed to sensationalize through

melodrama. These theatrical motifs accordingly alluded to the Gothic themes which had been in existence since the mid-1700s, and echoed tropes of contemporary literature such as isolation, darkness, horror, and drama to create a sense of dread in audiences. The ballad's setting of the shadowy, dreary, and windblown moor and eerily howling watchdog, combined with the tragic death of the protagonist and the subsequent ruination of the family house, all draw heavily upon this theme of the Gothic.

The song's lyrics show several disturbing plot twists which elicit the listener's compassion towards the unfortunate family. Firstly, although the song's conclusion states that Mary was "once the gay village bride," no mention is made of her husband throughout the piece (31). Mary's mother is similarly noticeably absent from the ballad, placing the responsibility squarely on the father as the nearest relation to help the girl. However, while the narrative is careful to portray him as a responsible and loving father, the old man unintentionally lets his family down three times; once, as he fails to hear his daughter calling to him, twice, in that he unwittingly agrees to let his daughter marry a man who does not provide for her wellbeing, and the third and final time as he leaves Mary's child with no one to take care of it after its mother's death (13, 25). This involuntary abandonment becomes even crueler considering that there are no indications of previous ill will towards Mary from her family, and there appears to be no ostracism from her kin. The pathetic conclusion is that Mary's story becomes a folktale to the villagers, and the protagonist dies alone and deserted by the key male figures in her life who could have saved her from her dismal end (29). The ballad ends with a narrative reminder of how much Mary's miserable death contrasted from her happy youth, and both the heroine's search for shelter and charity and her father's remorse and grief elicit compassion from the listener.

The Louvins were certainly no stranger to the emotional impact of ballads such as “Mary of the Wild Moor,” as they recorded similarly somber subject matter countless times, and they eventually recorded the song that had remained with them for so many years in 1956 with the release of their album *Tragic Songs of Life*, which acted as a compilation of the duo’s most heart-wrenching selections. The Louvins present “Mary of the Wild Moor” plainly, with a relatively sparse arrangement of acoustic and electric guitar, mandolin, and a snare drum, instead choosing to showcase their splendid harmonies. As the listener studies Charlie’s steady, pure melody line and Ira’s Sacred Harp-inspired harmony line which crosses from tenor, to unison for effect, and finally to baritone almost effortlessly, it is clear that both the recording’s subject matter and the music itself exemplify the components of what can be called the distinctive Louvin Brothers sound.

## CHAPTER 2

### “THE CHRISTIAN LIFE”: SACRED SONGS OF THE LOUVIN BROTHERS

Charlie and Ira Louvin’s music retained the identifying characteristics borrowed from shape-note singing and balladry that set them apart from their peers, and the brothers successfully created a sound rooted in tradition while building a reputation for innovation. The religious, or sacred, music genre was a common element of much of country, bluegrass, and folk music during the mid-20th century. Artists regularly performed hymns and gospel music that they had been raised to appreciate at venues as small as schoolhouses and as large as the Grand Ole Opry. The article “‘Just A Little Talk With Jesus’: Elvis Presley, Religious Music, and Southern Spirituality” describes a 1956 recording taken from what has since become known as the “Million Dollar Session” at Sun Studios in Memphis, Tennessee, featuring a selection of current stars such as Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash “improvising” and singing from “the common body of southern religious songs” that they had been raised with (Wilson 75). Author Charles Reagan Wilson points to such events as concrete examples of precisely how crucial the role music plays in creating a specific “spirituality” which “infuse[s] . . . culture far beyond the church doors” (75). This underlying mentality not only created a distinctive way of life, but also caused the music of the area to incorporate aspects of the sacred music sound. Although Wilson specifically identifies this cultural phenomenon within the perceived boundaries of the South, Appalachian scholars such as Loyal Jones readily acknowledge the same process, stating that daily “Appalachian social values and mores have been greatly influenced by religion and the scriptures” (414), and while the Alabamian Louvins, located within the southernmost corner of the Appalachian region but also situated within the

reach of the American South, fall into both regional identities, for the sake of this thesis' focus, I will focus on the Louvins within the context of Appalachian religion (414).

The Louvin Brothers were especially drawn into the themes of religion and sacred music in their own lives. The heritage of the family was strongly faith-based, and Charlie and Ira's upbringing gave them a solid foundation to use the themes that the boys heard every week in meetings to give their songs an uplifting and exhorting message to their listeners. When the brothers recorded their first album with Capitol Records in 1952, effectively launching their career into stardom, they relied strictly on these sacred pieces that they had grown up performing to fulfill their first three years of the contract alongside a stellar group of sidemen, including Chet Atkins (Wolfe 54). As a result, the duo became associated with their gospel hits over time and represented a religious ideal, despite the fact that they did not always live up to their message. Charlie Louvin described how both he and his brother were "always running into people who said that Louvin Brothers music caused them to live in a Christian home . . . I run into people constantly that make you feel like you're a preacher" (Louvin and Whitmer 79). The duo embraced this role with their many sacred recordings, encouraging their listeners to live godly everyday lives through their preservation of the concept of musical spirituality.

The role of acts like Louvin Brothers within this capacity is particularly noteworthy to many music writers, such as Michael Grimshaw, Nicholas Dawidoff, and Ted Ownby. Grimshaw points to country music as "the voice of the past in the present," and observes that "to ignore [country music's] rich vein of contextualized theology has been to marginalize an 'everyday' theology that both articulates and underwrites the *sitz en lieben* [setting of life] of millions—both within the United States and around the world" (94, 97). Dawidoff agrees, stating that that "some popular music was designed to help you escape from the world. Country forced you to wake up



on Sunday morning and confront your life” (Dawidoff 309). Likewise, as Ted Ownby claims, these artists were not only the musical heroes that their fans admired, but they were also “the best spokespersons,” thanks to their relatability (211). Charles Reagan Wilson states that the duo consistently relied on “such tenets of . . . evangelical culture as a familiarity with biblical characters and stories, moralistic expectations seen in song lyrics, and the peculiar dynamic of sin and salvation at work in evangelical faith” to craft their pieces, and an examination of several Louvin Brothers songs corroborates in a way that both religious and secular listeners could both enjoy (82).

The Louvin Brothers’ song “Satan Is Real” has become one of the duo’s most recognizable and enduring hits, and it has also gained more recent recognition for its vivid album cover. While it is not the most accurate representation of the brothers’ music throughout their career, it nonetheless such an iconic song that it would be a considerable oversight to omit it. Ira, who was responsible for the graphics of many of the duo’s album designs, created a design that closely paralleled the brothers’ personal conceptions of Hell, with a menacing twelve-foot plywood devil surrounded by fiery “old tires . . . soaked in kerosene” to make them burn quickly and dramatically (Louvin and Whitmer 226-27). To the Louvins, who were quite active in their family’s Baptist church, discussions of the devil were not only frequent, but crucial for believers to hear. The fundamentalist traditions and fiery preaching that inspired author Dennis Covington’s exposé *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* also impacted the young brothers within their thriving and devout religious community. Ira’s zeal for recreating the scene he had so vividly etched in his mind spoke to his strong feelings about the presence of the devil and the wary nature that Christians must have to avoid damnation. By placing this polarizing image on the cover of the album, as well as choosing

to title the record *Satan Is Real*, the Louvin Brothers effectively showed that both their beliefs and the presumed beliefs of their fans could be used as not only a proclamation of faith, but also as a valuable advertising technique.

The song, which was the title track of Charlie and Ira Louvin's 1959 album, begins as a duet that warns the listener of the perils of the devil. The singers depict Satan as a present danger to Christians, lurking to deceive and "lead astray" those who fall prey to his wiles (4). After the chorus of the song, the tempo dramatically slows, and an organ holds drawn-out chords while Ira Louvin narrates a fictional anecdote. The storyline details a church service whose pastor is interrupted by an old man who feels that the teaching omits an important part of the Christian lifestyle—avoidance of the devil. The man speaks from his own life experience to show the preacher and his congregation that Christians may easily backslide and fall into sin if they are not careful. The song concludes with the chorus to reinforce the importance of the song's topic.

The lyrics in "Satan Is Real" depict views of the three main subjects of the song—the "little old man" who tells his testimony, his heavenly Father, and the deceitful and devious Devil (13). The speaker, whom the narrator takes care to depict as a man with a great deal of life experience, does not explain precisely why he has succumbed to Satan's wiles, but he does illustrate how his life has taken a downturn since he has rejected God's ways. As he finishes his advice to the congregation, he shows that while the preacher is correct in attributing God's blessings and love to those who choose to follow Him, hell and "everlasting punishment" awaits those who do not (35). The character's plea to his peers corresponds to the steps he is taking in his own life. The very fact that the old man is attending church again shows signs of a contrite heart, and his call to remain in God's love and reject Satan's temptation paints a picture of the devil as one who constantly lurks in the shadows of a man's life, waiting for even the smallest

lapse in faith to lure believers away. This rhetorical strategy plants an implied seed of fear within the congregation members to obey God rather than fall into evil, but it similarly provokes the listener as well in a way that proved to be a recurring theme within the Louvins' many sacred songs. The tradition of many denominations to avoid discussing the devil and evil is effectively criticized by Ira and Charlie Louvin, and the "call to arms" that they issue to their godly listeners is plainly told in this relatable parable.

Interestingly, the lyrics of "Satan Is Real" show a perspective on the dangers of sin and temptation that also comment on the listener's responsibility through a critique of the song's characters. In the spoken-word narration, the man who is telling his life story explains that his life has been ideal before Satan entered into his life (25). However, the lack of personal responsibility that the speaker takes is notable. He effectively blames the devil for wreaking havoc on his life, but as he does so, the old man removes the burden of accountability from himself for resisting him. This avoidance alludes to an external danger of temptation that is blamed on the devil making one do certain acts, rather than the believer taking responsibility of their personal duty to maintain their own holiness.

Incidentally, the perspective on evil that "Satan Is Real" shows varies significantly from another of the Louvins' hits that discusses sin and temptation. A prominent track on the album, Edgar L. Eden's "Satan's Jewel Crown," came to be associated with the duo (although the track listing on the back album cover of *Satan Is Real* lists this song as "Satan's Jeweled Crown," the sheet music to the piece titles it "Satan's Jewel Crown," which is what this song will be referred to for the remainder of this work.) In the 1958 recording of this song, the persona speaks in the first person about the saving power of their heavenly father. The main character in the song states that their life has been changed for the better because of God's love and saving grace.

They tell the listener about their previous sinful lifestyle, describing it as a metaphorical crown that they wore (1-2). However, this crown that the persona used to find such pleasure in is now a past transgression that they acknowledge, admit, and have sought forgiveness for. Their quest to find the missing piece in their life ended with the realization that a drunken lifestyle or “running around” with women was not the solution to their problems (13). The speaker realizes that they must first take responsibility for their sins, for they are effectively “giving [their] soul for Satan’s jewel crown” of earthly rewards and pleasures (15).

This song has several biblical allusions in it that provide powerful imagery. The reference in the first verse to becoming a “king and ruler of nations” through Satan’s power is lifted from the temptation of Jesus in the book of Matthew (Matt. 4:8-9). As ruler of the world, Satan has offered Jesus the glory of the world’s kingdoms if he would only worship him, and the narrator of “Satan’s Jewel Crown” states that he too could be tempted in like manner but would not renounce his status as a child of God. Likewise, the lifestyle that the narrator has been leading, while seemingly free from care, is in fact a trap set by the devil to take individuals captive to do his will. The converted speaker has resolved to give up “the will of the devil” as mentioned in the song’s final verse for the will of God (14).

Like “Satan Is Real,” the subject matter of this duet shows a somewhat darker portrayal of the Christian faith. Satan is in fact mentioned more times throughout the lyrics than God is. This sobering perspective gives credence to the spiritual wars that Christians are urged to fight against the devil. The disconcerting admittance that the speaker makes in the second verse’s final line, which states “I was giving my soul for Satan’s jewel crown” accentuates the seriousness of their sins and also emphasizes the impact of God’s act of reaching out to them and claiming them again (15). The paradoxical depiction of God that is shown in several of Charlie and Ira Louvin’s

songs is likewise visible in “Satan’s Jewel Crown.” The speaker begins the song by depicting God as gracious and merciful, stating that he “reached down” to the sinner and “helped [them] cast off” the titular metaphorical crown (3, 6). However, a key element of this individual’s relationship with God is found in the first verse. “I’d rather know that I had salvation / than to know my reward is Satan’s jewel crown,” the narrator asserts (10, 11). While the chorus speaks to God’s love and acceptance, this line points to the fear of God, as the main character expresses that they would rather serve God and be sure of his acceptance than to receive only the fruits of worldly pursuits and not gain eternal life. This relationship is therefore partially reliant upon a component of fear of punishment—a terrifying thought for those aware of their own guilt and shame. Only after the persona has taken responsibility for their sin are they finally able to receive God’s forgiveness and love. This love, which the singers depict as a grace extended to save those who humble themselves before God, proved to be the fulfillment that they sought. Despite the many worldly pleasures that they abandoned, the speaker states that no amount of riches or power could convince them to renounce their faith, and they would “rather know that [they] had salvation” than to continue in their former lifestyle and fear of punishment (10-11). Still, the song ends happily, rather than with the foreboding tone of “Satan Is Real,” showing the peace and relief that can come from this approach to dealing with sin.

Another Louvin Brothers song which shows the joy of resisting the devil is “Satan and the Saint.” While it is one of the lesser-known religious songs that the Louvin Brothers recorded, it nonetheless fits comfortably into the thematic categories of salvation, repentance, and sin that the duo so frequently wrote about. The 1958 recording consists of a conversational format held between the speaker in the song and the devil, who is trying to lure his target from their faith. Each of the four verses begins with a statement by Satan spoken by Charlie and a response sung

by Ira to counter the declaration and resist temptation. In the first verse, Satan claims “I have the world to offer you,” which is quickly squelched by the main character (1). The speaker reminds the devil that while he does reign over the world for the time being, this power will last only until God wreaks vengeance upon the earth on the Judgment Day, and asks “what will you have to offer then to a dying soul?” (7). Satan then responds in the second verse with “but think of all you’re giving up” and in the third verse “you don’t sin, you’re good enough” to convince his victim, but to no avail (8, 16). The speaker confidently asserts that the only thing that they are giving up is “the chance to die” and states that while all have sinned, they “think that God has made a way” out from the terrible fate that awaits the unrepentant and godless (9, 12). In the fourth and final verse, the speaker rejects Satan for the last time with the confident conclusion “everything you offer me / don’t mean nothing to my heart . . . take the world and get behind . . . Jesus is my choice” (24-25, 29, 32). The piece effectively acts as a lyrical depiction of the biblical adage “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” while placing Jesus at the forefront of the character’s decisions as the “way” to everlasting life (Jas. 4:7, Jn. 14:6).

In “Satan and the Saint,” the Louvins utilize the combination of spoken word and melodic lyrics that they had become recognized for in many sacred songs. However, the opening declarations from Satan (set apart through heavy reverb from the rest of the verses) are notable for the exchange that follows—instead of the brothers simply stating what believers should do to resist the devil, “Satan and the Saint” acts as a roadmap through one individual’s fictional experience. The speaker takes a more active role in this song, counteracting the devil not by actions but by dialogue in a way similar to the temptation of Jesus in the gospels. In the fourth chapter of the book of Matthew, Satan tempts Jesus by offering him “all the kingdoms of the world” if he will only worship the devil (Matt. 4:8-9). While the song does begin with Satan

coercing the speaker with the line “I have the world to offer you” in a similar way to “Satan’s Jewel Crown,” the devil’s appeals primarily speak to the idea of opportunities that the believer will miss out on, such as the final verse’s opening “life will be too dull for you” (23). This is the common complaint of many sinners in the Louvin Brothers’ songs, such as “The Christian Life.” However, the speaker ignores this final ploy to contrast the difference between the worldly pleasures that the devil offers and the “peace of mind” and “everlasting joy” that God gives his children (30-31). With Jesus shown as the “way” to escape everlasting punishment and their “choice,” the persona accepts the responsibility to remain faithful to their savior and reject the sinfulness of the world for God’s love. (32)

While “Satan’s Jewel Crown” and “Satan and the Saint” undoubtedly show the perils of submitting to evil, they also clearly depict the love, acceptance, and forgiveness of God that an individual can gain from choosing repentance. However, the love shown to these songs’ speakers are not unique to these particular pieces. Charlie and Ira Louvin did not shy away from the tougher topics of faith, but their songs did include clear-cut choices to the listener about how they could find fulfillment—either temporarily, through the pursuit of worldly pleasures, or through finding faith in God and adopting “The Christian Life,” according to Charlie:

Ira wrote about choices. Most of our gospel songs weren’t really guilt songs, but they were obvious songs. They’d tell you that if you’re a good person, a righteous person, then you can go to heaven. But if you think you can do anything you want and still go to heaven . . . God’s always right there when you think you’re getting away with something. There’s nothing that escapes him and nothing he doesn’t know. (Louvin and Whitmer 127, 225)

Many of the sacred songs that the Louvin Brothers recorded speak to this tenet of their faith, and one that particularly relies on this topic is titled “The Christian Life.” As in “Satan’s Jewel Crown,” the narrator’s decision to adopt a more holy lifestyle prompts their sinful life to change for the better, causing them to offer the song as a grateful response to God’s offering of love and grace. In “The Christian Life,” the narrator tells the listener that the choice to follow Christ has changed his life in several key ways. Despite the fact that he freely admits that he does truly “like the Christian life,” the narrator finds that his acquaintances act differently after refusing to join them in the worldly activities that the group used to enjoy (1). The new convert declares that he feels called to model the lifestyle that he has chosen in front of his former friends to attempt to convert them, since they “burden [his] heart” (11-12). The persona explains that he will not be disheartened by the fact that these acquaintances now “shun” him because they do not truly care about him (10, 7). The narrator closes with the repeated assertion that he is content in the decision he has made to follow Christ and the lifestyle that he now leads.

“The Christian Life” discusses three types of love: God’s love, the love of worldly pleasures, and the love of one friend for another. The narrator navigates these three topics throughout the song’s lyrics as he discusses his transformation. In the second verse, the persona admits that he has not always been a Christian (10). While the song does not directly state it, the lyrics suggest that the comrades, who are no longer friendly towards the persona, have shared interests with the persona prior to his conversion. However, this individual has abandoned these ways and instead “turned to Jesus” to gain salvation—an act of sacrifice that the Bible states was done out of God’s great love of the world (John 3:16). The speaker’s conversion causes him to shun the carnal desires that he now realizes are sinful, and it also reveals that his “buddies” are not truly friends (2). As he explains in the chorus, a true friend would not drag a companion



down into sin with them, so he does not actually lose any friends by reforming (6-7). To this point, the final verse points to the empathy and Christian love that the speaker feels towards these individuals. He resolves to “lead them to walk in the light” because of his concern for them (12). The persona’s enthusiasm (and even doctrinally incorrect pride in his decision) about his new life in Christ leads him to want to show his buddies that the Christian life is a more joy filled and ultimately fulfilling one, and that his new life is better than the worldly one that they all previously have shared (4). However, there are ultimately a few problematic issues with this song—there is evidence that the newly-converted speaker is ultimately not a mature Christian yet. This interpretation is evidenced by his immature pride in his decision, which does not stand up to the biblical critique of verses like Proverbs 16:5, stating “Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD” (Prov. 16:5). As well, there is not a clear indication of how many times the narrator has approached the “friends” who said that he “should have waited,” implying that there is nothing wrong with repenting after having some “fun” in sin. Nevertheless, these characters associate God’s acceptance of sin as being similar to their own, and as the following song implies, this position is truly a dangerous mindset to adopt for anyone living outside the will of God.

“The Angels Rejoiced Last Night” is a song that the Louvin Brothers recorded on their 1959 album *Satan Is Real*, and the primary character in the piece undergoes a transformation that is quite reminiscent of the storyline of “The Christian Life.” The lyrics depict the less-than-ideal family situation that the main speaker grew up in. “A house, but not a home” is the phrase that the narrator uses to describe the atmosphere that they were born into (1). Even though the mother in the story is a believer and prays for her husband and their two children, her spouse is a hardened, cynical figure. The narrator attributes this attitude to Satan, claiming that “Satan held

his [father's] hand down the path of sin he trod" (9). The father dislikes seeing or hearing his wife praying, frequently indulges in swearing, and spends his Sundays (traditionally the holiest of days) not in church but engaged in the controversial act of gambling with his friends (4, 6, 7). The major twist in the plot occurs when the narrator describes how "God called on Mother one night" (11). Her final words are to her husband, begging him to "raise her children right" (13). With the family now devastated, the final verse indicates a vast change in the father's attitude from the surly and rebellious unbeliever found in the previous verses to a humbled and repentant sinner. For the first time, the narrator tells of hearing the father ask God to mend the errors of the past and make everything right (15). With his heart now softened, the father appears to have undergone a massive emotional and spiritual change, and the narrator celebrates the reformation by stating that even "the angels rejoiced" over the song's key transformation.

On the surface, "The Angels Rejoiced Last Night" appears to be simply an anecdotal depiction of one family's life, but a closer examination of the lyrics proves that the content of the piece is far more complex. Like several of the Louvin Brothers' secular songs, the song deals with the concept of the flawed father figure and his interactions with his children—something that Charlie and Ira drew upon from their own lives. However, while the father/child relationship is a repeated trope, this instance varies from the rest in that the father repents and turns from his ways. This decision not only grants his dying wife's final request, but it also allows him to finally establish his role as head of the household, a title that this husband arguably could not fulfil while he was focused on solely on himself and pursuing his own pleasure. This change can even be seen in the third verse, as the mother pleads with her husband to "raise *her* children right" (13, emphasis added). Her word choice alludes to the pressure and responsibility that she has felt to the children, and with the father's reclamation of his role within the family, order and

happiness is restored through the change that God made in his life. As well, the conscious repetition of the word “right” in the final chorus deliberately echoes the wife’s statement in the previous verse and shows the main character’s determination to correct the situation to the best of his ability. To mend the rift in the family, he turns to God as the ultimate paternal figure, righting the subversion of the father and child trope which is found in the first chorus (“For Satan held his hand down the path of sin he trod” [9]). Incidentally, the very fact that the narrator uses the name “daddy” for his father which indicates a closeness and familiarity, and “mother” which alludes to a more distant and almost reverent parent, seems to show the effectiveness of the father’s change. The listener is left believing that the father’s neglect will be rectified and that his newly adopted Christian life will influence his family positively.

Charlie Louvin has stated that “Are You Afraid to Die?” was his favorite track from the 1959 record *Satan Is Real*, and it was in fact one of his favorite Louvin Brothers songs ever (Louvin and Whitmer 228). The lyrics serve as a call to the lost, telling them to repent of their sins and reconsider their ways, while speaking to God’s acceptance, saving power, and forgiveness. The narrative begins with a call to lost sinners to examine their ways and repent for their past deeds. The speakers first appeal to these individuals through the subtle suggestion that the sinner might consider thinking about life after death, effectively planting the seed of doubt that their current lifestyle and “pride” will be able to save them from condemnation (2-4). These failings of the sinners make them strangers to God, who will hear the sinner’s plea despite their backsliding. The duet continues with advice to return to the teachings of one’s mother, and to “kneel” and “stray not from her side” as she teaches her children how to pray (7). There is no question in the minds of the personae that God will then forgive the individual’s sins, as they state that “God will hear your cry” (8).

The speakers create a sense of urgency throughout this song, as the next stanza clearly shows. They tell the object of the song that God will not announce his presence on the judgment day, but rather will come “like a thief in the night,” surprising the world and leaving unrepentant sinners with not even so much as “time for a prayer” (10, 11). After calling out once more to the “afraid,” “unsaved,” and those “afraid to die,” the speakers urge their listeners once more to speedily beg God for his mercy (13-15). Once one fully surrenders one’s life to God, the lyrics state that the new believer needs only to have faith in their redemption, and God will erase the sins of their previous life.

The song’s format is constructed of three main parts, whose chordal structure and rhyme scheme vary with each repetition. The verses are grouped into a first cluster of three and a second cluster of two, interspersed with the chorus of “Are you afraid? / Are you unsaved? / Are you afraid to die?” (13-15). The song’s unconventional verse structures use a wide selection of rhyme scheme formats, such as ABCB, AAAA, ABAA, ABCB, and ABCB. Despite these variations, the song’s persuasive structure itself provides a steady progression through the Louvins’ argument by asking a question of the sinner (such as “Would you to God’s bosom fly?”) and then providing an answer (“Kneel with your mother, stray not from her side / God will hear your cry) to solve their spiritual confusion (6-8).

An examination of the language of “Are You Afraid to Die?” reveals that it has several key allusions from both the Old and New Testaments. The third-to-last stanza asks the question “Will you seek him while he may be found?” which is a reference to the book of Isaiah (18). The prophet states that sinners must “Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will

abundantly pardon” (Isa. 55:6-7). Likewise, the third stanza refers to first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, in which the apostle states, “For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night” (11; 1 Thess. 5:1-4). The Louvin Brothers incorporate these verses into their songs not only as references, but also as sound theological advice that they truly believed.

“Are You Afraid to Die?” speaks to the topic of the religious call in a way that truly affected Ira Louvin. According to Charlie, Ira “had a gift for songwriting, true, but he also had another gift that interfered with his songwriting. It was that calling to be a preacher. I always got the feeling that some of those songs came from Ira understanding that he should have been a preacher, that maybe he’d made the wrong choice himself” (Louvin and Whitmer 127, 229). While Charlie Louvin’s theories regarding his brother’s personal demons do not tell the whole story, the fact remains that Ira did admit that he felt God had called him to preach, and even suggested to Charlie that the duo quit their regular touring schedule to “just play churches” and “just play gospel” (Louvin and Whitmer 229). However, the Louvin Brothers continued to perform secular music, and Ira’s own drunken rampages and womanizing lifestyle paralleled the sinners that he preached to. His narrations and singing in many of the Louvins’ most recognizable sacred numbers that detailed God’s forgiveness and acceptance were lifted from true-life stories that he witnessed or lived, such as “The Price of the Bottle,” revealing his still-present determination to preach the gospel of reformation (Wolfe 116). This tension between creed and deed proved to be a recurring issue within the brothers’ lives, and it ultimately influenced much of their religious songwriting.

“Are You Afraid to Die?” incorporates the theme of acceptance in a way that shows an intriguing perspective of God. If an individual repents and returns to their heavenly Father, the

brothers state that they will then escape the sinner's punishment. Emphasis is placed on God's might and power and his ability to bring judgment "everywhere," effectively drawing upon the concept of the fear of God (21). As well, the imagery of the "thief in the night" that is mentioned in the third stanza parallels this statement (11). The duet leans towards an almost morbid portrayal of God as a heavenly being who will hunt down his rebellious children and punish them while they are unawares, and seeks to produce this fear in the hearts of the listeners, who may then turn from their sins and repent. While the song's lyrics do show that the sinner is able to find acceptance and ultimately forgiveness through humbling one's self, the alternative end that Charlie and Ira Louvin depict is one disturbing enough to urge the individual to consider their ways before they are "carried away" in God's wrath (2).

As evidenced by the previous songs, the urgency of the call to repentance was quite pervasive in the Louvins' recordings from the late 1950s. "There's No Excuse" is a bluntly evangelical song that like "Are You Afraid to Die?" presents the listener with the benefits of Christianity and then refutes potential arguments to not turn to this salvation. The piece begins with the chorus' titular statement, proclaiming that the choice to become a Christian simply requires a willing heart. The narrative continues by reminding the listener that "you can make your own decision" but between the temptation of Satan and the blinding power of earthly pleasures, the fate of anyone who chooses to reject God and his salvation is grim, and according to the song's lyrics, unforgivable (7). The speaker in the song reminds their audience that the relationship that they have with their creator is crucial despite the advice that their friends may give them. To avoid God's judgement, the song states "when you have time on your hands, spend it on your knees" (16). The speaker relates their own history in the final verse, praising

God for sending Jesus to die for their sins, and reminding the listener that their choice to accept salvation was an obvious one, rather than dying “undone” (24).

This song, despite its packaging within a sprightly, bouncy melody, delivers a gravely emphatic message. The lyrics show the mindset that salvation is not an elitist privilege which only upper-class individuals may obtain. The final verse shows this difference, contrasting the lines “If I had to buy salvation I could never see his face” (showing the socioeconomic status of the singer) with the following statement “But God so loved the sinner he gave his only son” (22-23). While the persona could not afford to buy salvation, they instead accept God’s free gift of Jesus to atone for their sins, which acts as a call to individuals of varying educations and finances to experience this. Like many of Charlie and Ira Louvin’s songs, “There’s No Excuse” is sung from the perspective of an experienced Christian, and it relies on the concept of punishment to strike the fear of God into the audience. However, while God is the one who eventually executes judgement, the individual listening to the song is the one who must decide if they want to follow the advice advocated by the song’s speakers. The emphasis is placed throughout on personal responsibility to follow Christianity and truth, with the exception of the fifth line of the song. “If you let Satan bind you, he’ll tempt you more and more,” the first verse states, but the use of the word “let” reminds the listener of their responsibility to resist the devil (5). If one *lets* the devil bind them, implying that they are allowing Satan to control their circumstances, then the individual ultimately has forfeited responsibility for the turn of events that follows, and therefore has “no excuse” for dying “in sin” (9, 12). The following song similarly shows the importance of fighting back against the devil’s wiles and demonstrates how to do so successfully.

Finally, in “There’s a Higher Power,” the call-and-response duet also talks of an all-powerful and almighty God who is still willing to accept those who have strayed from his divine

path, as long as they believe in his saving grace and might. This upbeat song depicts God paradoxically through its lyrics. Charlie and Ira Louvin utilize a call-and-response songwriting format that answers a statement with a repeated answer of the titular assertion, reinforcing its importance. The piece calls out to struggling listeners whose “burdens seem to overcome” them to surrender their souls to Christ, rather than trusting in human wisdom and might (1, 6). The repeated “there’s a higher power” at the end of each line of the song serves as a constant reminder to these individuals of the hope that they can have if they become a Christian (11). “There’s a Higher Power” contains a strong presence of proselytism, with its calls to “sing and shout and walk and talk” and tell “people lost in sin” about the saving power of God (5, 9). As the narrator speaks, they take the listener through a timeline of the Christian life, from the initial promise of grace in the first verse to the biblical call to then tell others about God’s salvation (Luke 8:39). The depiction of God also varies within this song’s lyrics. The initial description of God in the first stanza describes him as a welcoming and merciful Father, willing to accept any of his children who call upon his name (2). However, the second verse reveals a different perspective of God, stating that unless the people “lost in sin” reform, they “will surely die,” meaning that they will not receive eternal life (9, 11-12). This almighty and vengeful God is referenced in the final verse, which reminds the listener that he is the only way to salvation (16). The personas of the gracious and kind Father figure contrasting with the stern disciplinarian are bridged by Jesus as mediator, who “bought” the sinners’ souls through his death so that these individuals can have God’s wrath towards them voided and be accepted again as his children (6).

This acceptance that God provides in “There’s a Higher Power” relies upon the choice of the listener. The call to evangelize to the unbelievers in the second verse shows that the people “lost in sin” can be saved through humbling themselves to God (9). This provides a conditional



promise—if an individual wishes to be accepted by God, they must in turn accept him out of their own free will rather than being forced by God into salvation, which is a scripturally supported concept (Rev. 3:20). The song goes on to show that once a person has done so, they are then able to receive divine help and protection and need no longer “fear the works of men” (10). “There’s a Higher Power” ultimately shows that there are two sides to the same God, and the listener gets to choose which side of the divine being that they see.

The analysis of these quintessential Louvin Brothers songs provides several key themes—firstly, that an individual needs to take ownership of and resist the temptation to sin; secondly, that the act of rejecting these worldly pleasures will then allow one to receive God’s love and acceptance; thirdly, that receiving God’s love will cause the believer to no longer feel the need to stray; and finally, that constantly maintaining a holy lifestyle will bring forth only the loving manifestation of God, rather than one bent on judgment. While these core themes of love, acceptance, rejection, and forgiveness appear quite frequently within the sacred songs of Charlie and Ira Louvin, careful examination and close reading show that the secular lyrics of this duo utilize the same concepts directed at the object of their affections. The following chapter shows how the transference of these key themes from God to a woman creates striking similarity between sacred and secular song lyrics and effectively bridges the gap between these two seemingly disconnected topics.

## CHAPTER 3

### “I CAN’T KEEP YOU IN LOVE WITH ME”: SECULAR SONGS OF THE LOUVIN BROTHERS

Charlie and Ira Louvin returned to the Capitol Records studio in 1958 to prove that they were capable of selling secular records. While the duo continued to record and perform sacred songs until they disbanded, the reappearance of the secular ballads that launched their career proved successful (Louvin and Whitmer 225). The power and emotion behind their lyrics expanded their already dedicated fan base, and the listeners who had already fallen in love with their harmonic mastery from their sacred songs were drawn to the contrasting ballads. Despite the seeming external disparity of lyrical subjects, the resulting songs were in fact more thematically connected than they would first appear. The same key concepts of love, acceptance, and rejection that are found in the brothers’ sacred song repertoire surface yet again, but with a slightly different context.

Musicologist Bill Malone states that love, both successful and failed, drives the plot throughout most lyrics from the developmental period of bluegrass and country music, and the “predilection for the mournful” as a Louvin Brothers song theme is “very high” (15). By the time the Louvin Brothers reached their peak in the mid-1950s and 1960s, country music standards such as “Your Cheatin’ Heart,” “Crazy Arms,” and “Walkin’ after Midnight” all depicted the persona in the common genre trope of a victim of “love gone wrong.” This stark perspective was not only accepted, but beloved by the mid-century Americans. Malone maintains that rural communities “responded affectionately to songs which reaffirmed the values of home, family, mother, and God, and they took to their hearts songs about dying orphans, neglected mothers,

blind children, maidens who died of broken hearts, and eastbound trains that carried penniless children to see their poor blind convict fathers” (16).

“A Tiny Broken Heart,” written by the Louvin Brothers, has subject matter that is uniquely suited to this study. While this 1958 duet is not the most well-known of all of the duo’s creations, the song did experience a revival in popularity when Dan Tyminski recorded it as a duet with Alison Krauss on his 2000 album *Carry Me across the Mountain* (Wolfe 73). The plot details the story of a young boy who discovers one day that his sweetheart is moving away. Sung from first-person perspective, the song’s main character seeks to reverse the sensation of loss that he feels when his friend leaves. After noticing a moving truck next door while playing outside one day, the young boy learns from his father that his playmate’s family is moving away that same day. Heartbroken, the boy tries to “conceive a plan” to prevent them from leaving, which consists of selflessly sacrificing his toys and small collection of coins—incidentally, which the little girl helped him to gather—to assist his father in buying their neighbors’ farm (14, 21-24).

A closer examination of this song reveals subtle themes that depict a complex set of circumstances. The fifth verse of the song provides some crucial insight into the socioeconomic situation of both families. The father tells his son that his sweetheart’s family cannot remain on their farm anymore because they firstly do not even own the property, and secondly, their temporary job is completed. This explanation suggests that that the little girl may belong to a family of sharecroppers or hired farm workers who must leave after the harvest (20). However, the little boy cannot fully understand the economic disparity of the two families’ situations. While he and his father do not have to move, and, one might assume, may in fact own their farm and not have to work for hired labor, the boy’s “darling” and her family are not so fortunate.

As well, “A Tiny Broken Heart” depicts the emotional character development of its main character. The little boy moves from the mindset of a carefree child playing outside with his toys to retaining several of the values that he sees his father embody on a daily basis. His immediate reaction of distress (““Oh no,’ he cried, ‘dear God, don’t let it be’”) gives way to an attitude of decisiveness and planning (11). Within the song, the little boy subconsciously tackles such responsible concepts as planning for the future, having a sweetheart, and providing for her in their domestic life. However, he does not have the actual resources to carry out his plans, leaving him helplessly offering suggestions to his father of how their neighbors may remain in their house. Nevertheless, the care and forethought that he shows despite his limited capabilities shows touching devotion to his sweetheart. His emotional coming-of-age, despite the fact that he is too young to fully realize it at this point in his life, is developed through these feelings of love and loss and therefore fosters his maturity. This song ends ambiguously, implying to the listener that the little boy’s generosity, while touching, will be lightly dismissed by his realistic father. The upbeat tempo and sprightly mandolin contrast with the lyrics in a way that mirrors this perceived dismissal.

Another offering that similarly describes the topic of love is the classic duet “If I Could Only Win Your Love.” The song was written by Ira in 1958 about one of his own failed flirtations and was released on the album *Ira and Charlie* (Wolfe 89). It is addressed to an unnamed subject who is the object of the speaker’s unrequited affections. The song begins with a love-struck narrator who is lamenting the hopelessness of their current relationship with an unnamed beloved. The song lyrics make it evident that the speaker is pleading with a character who has captured their heart and imagination, but who is either not as emotionally invested as the narrator, is purposely choosing to ignore the singer’s feelings, or may be completely

oblivious. The persona describes the sacrifices that they would be willing to make for the object of their affections throughout the song, such as being willing to sacrifice their current life to marry this individual (3). They state that they would “make the most of everything” and would always remain true to their love (2, 4). However, the narrator still is haunted by the fact that they do not feel that they are able to explain these feelings towards the beloved despite their great attraction.

The song’s titular concept of love is rather ambiguous throughout this song. While the speaker uses the word quite frequently throughout the course of the piece, the specific type of love they refer to is vague. For instance, the narrator sings in the second verse, “Oh, how can I ever say / how I crave your love when you’re gone away” (10). The previous chorus and verse, as well as the title of the song itself reflect on how delighted the speaker would be if they could in fact obtain this character’s love, implying that the love referred to in the second verse is a different form of love than the one that they are currently receiving (for instance, romantic and platonic love). This ambiguity also raises questions about the progression of the relationship. While the final line of the second verse reveals that the love interest has in fact previously held the narrator tight, little else is said about the reciprocation or actions between the characters other than the musings of the speaker (12).

“If I Could Only Win Your Love” also depicts a love that is unselfish in its nature. The narrator’s claims to “give [their] all” (even including giving themselves in marriage) to make their beloved happy shows an extreme dedication (6). The song itself can be perceived as a proposal to this individual, while the lyrics do not explicitly state this, and there is no way of knowing if the words of the song are actually spoken to the individual or if they are simply inward musings of the narrator. However, the narrator’s willingness to even give themselves in marriage does not

guarantee that the beloved will love them after the two are married. The unresolved nature of the lyrics leaves the listener wondering if the object of the singer's affections will reciprocate these feelings and give the character the fulfilment that they so desire. The deep need in the heart of the narrator for their sweetheart and their declarations of the grateful sacrifices that they would make is a theme which similarly appeared in the previous piece, "A Tiny Broken Heart."

While these two songs are not necessarily the most well-known of the Louvins' creations, they are nonetheless important to examine for several reasons. From a historical aspect, these songs reveal a great deal about the songwriting process that Charlie and Ira Louvin utilized. The brothers created a catalog of secular songs that spoke clearly to the relationships that they themselves experienced so keenly throughout their lives, with Charlie often suggesting the concept, and Ira providing the words to fit the music. Charlie's 2010 interview with *American Songwriter* speaks to the special significance several of his songs had to him, stating "the first two songs that we wrote were about my girlfriend . . . . One was called 'A Tiny Broken Heart.' I was about 14 when I wrote it" (Waterman). The many real-life struggles that the brothers endured, from Charlie's fond memories of his girlfriend to Ira's ongoing search for love and acceptance were used as songwriting material to fuel the duo's multiple records. Scholar Bill Malone states that this not only provided the brothers with excellent foundations to build their hit records upon, but created a sense of emotional accessibility and "made the music irresistible" to their audience, who enjoyed the relatability and intimacy that the themes and storylines provided (14-15).

The desire for the love of the seemingly unattainable woman is an evidently recurring theme throughout much of the Louvin Brothers' catalog. In songs like "If I Could Only Win Your Love," "When I Stop Dreaming," and "Hoping that You're Hoping," the personae reveal

yearning for the unrequited acceptance and love that they feel will make them emotionally complete. This release of emotion through singing is a theme that is similarly found in many of the Louvins' gospel songs. A look at the duo's extensive sacred music catalog proves that the love of women was not the only love that fulfilled needs in their lives. Like many of their religious selections, there is a similar search for value in the satisfaction of another, and similarly, there is some doubt as to whether the object of the song will accept the narrator.

Contrasting "Satan's Jewel Crown" and "The Christian Life" with "If I Could Only Win Your Love" and "A Tiny Broken Heart" creates a fascinating paradox. The relationships between the speakers in the secular songs and the objects of their affections depict a love that is often unconditional. While love may not be returned immediately (as in "A Tiny Broken Heart") or even at all (as in "If I Could Only Win Your Love"), the speaker often feels the need to assure the other party of the constancy of their affection. This undying love is in many ways a parallel with the biblical depiction of God. Numerous biblical verses portray God as a caring father to his often-wayward children, offering his love and acceptance to those who turn from their previous lifestyles. Verses such as Romans 10:8, which states "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," and John's message that "We love him, because he first loved us" parallel Charlie and Ira Louvin's depiction of God in these previously mentioned sacred songs (Rom. 10:8; 1 John 4:19).

Interestingly, this desire for acceptance that surfaces in many of the Louvin Brothers' romantic songs also parallels similarly with the plea for acceptance from God, which the brothers maintain is the way to be saved. In songs such as "If I Could Only Win Your Love," with its line that states "You'll never know how much I'd give / if I could only win your love," the yearning for acceptance despite the failings of the narrator is manifested in a way that closely resembles

several of the duo's gospel songs (7-8). This needful position shows a parallel between the themes of sacred and secular songs that bridges the gap between the two subgenres. However, although the topics of love and acceptance appear in both sacred and secular songs, the Louvin Brothers do provide one crucial separation in their cross-subgenre use of the themes. The constancy of affection that is shown in the songs' characters appears to vary considerably. As shown in "A Tiny Broken Heart" and "If I Could Only Win Your Love," the narrators of the songs find that the individuals that they seek frequently reject them, creating a longing for fulfilment that often remains unrequited. Nevertheless, the same pleas to God for love are usually heard and realized according to his mercies. The struggle between the "desires of the flesh" and the needs of the spirit are both realized within this same desperate search for love, but in vastly contrasting ways (Gal. 5:17). While each of these songs' narrators feel that gaining either a woman's or God's love will bring them peace and contentment, the process of pursuing this fulfilment ultimately leads to three realizations: firstly, that their constancy of affection towards their beloved does not ensure that the love is returned; secondly, that humbling one's self before God is the only sure way to receive the fulfilment that the narrators are seeking; and finally, that God's love is constant. In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet states "The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee" (Jer. 31:3). The struggle between the two competing sources of fulfilment ultimately relies not only upon the hope of acceptance, but the despair of rejection, a theme which consumes the main characters of Louvin Brothers songs in a similar manner.

The theme of rejection looms over much of the Louvin Brothers' lives and songwriting. Both brothers experienced failed love, and Charlie and Ira penned some heartbreaking duets that proved to be country and bluegrass standards decades later. However, an examination of several



songs reveals a multi-faceted approach to the same theme. Three songs in particular stand out for their nearly sequential timeline of mourning and loss, and they demonstrate how one topic can be written about in an adaptable fashion. “When I Stop Dreaming,” one of the most easily recognizable songs the brothers wrote, marked their return to recording secular songs. The duo pitched it to Capitol Records producer Ken Nelson and, after agreeing to return to sacred songs if sales did not increase, Charlie and Ira recorded the song that would prove to be the highest charting song of their career (Louvin and Whitmer 161-62).

“When I Stop Dreaming” depicts the aftereffects of rejection through the melancholy reflections of the lovelorn narrator. The plaintive piece opens with the claim “when I stop dreaming / that’s when I’ll stop loving you,” setting the tone for the rest of the declarations of affections (1-2). The narrator describes the intense emotional pain and suicidal thoughts that they suffered when their lover at the time informed them that they “loved someone else” and attempted to convince them to “forget,” an act which the persona emphatically states will only happen once they “stops dreaming” (4, 6, 7). They liken themselves to a “flower unwanted in spring” in a “garden of sadness,” and they reinforce their constancy of affection to the song’s subject through the use of metaphors derived from the natural world (9, 11). The song ends in a similar fashion to its beginning, with Charlie and Ira Louvin singing the main character’s final line “when I stop dreaming / that’s when I’ll stop crying for you” (19-20). Sweeping, wistful chords end the song, and the audience is left almost abruptly without any further clue of the narrator’s plight.

The format of this song effectively shows the four major ways that the main character is mourning for their beloved. The chorus, which is sung in between each verse, is modified slightly each of the four times that the Louvin Brothers harmonize it. The first of the two lines,

which is the title of the song, remains the same with each repetition, but the second lines of each of the choruses replace one action each time. The first of these states “that’s when I’ll stop loving you,” the second replaces the word “loving” with the word “wanting,” the third inserts the phrase “thinking of you,” and the final chorus concludes the song with the line “that’s when I’ll stop crying for you” (2, 8, 14, 20). The progression from loving to wanting to thinking to crying provides a miniature timeline of the stages of grief that the narrator feels. The first chorus mirrors the fact that they still love the unnamed subject of the song when they find out that this character no longer loved them as well, and the second verse shows that while the narrator still longs for the beloved, the severity of their feelings have abated slightly from love to an unfulfilled wanting. The third verse implies that the speaker’s emotions have somewhat diminished, as they still think of this individual, but do not feel the same passion that they once had. However, the final verse proves the narrator still retains some feelings for the song’s subject, as they state that only when they stop dreaming will they “stop crying for” this former love (20).

“When I Stop Dreaming” relies heavily upon the concepts of visions and dreams. The narrator, clearly distressed from the abrupt separation from their beloved, appears to rely on these fantasies to combat the acute feelings of loss that threaten their life. The song’s chant-like repetition of the chorus combined with the second verse’s vivid metaphorical imagery and the third verse’s surreal comparisons of unnatural events depict a narrator who is relying upon their own fantasies to romanticize the event and therefore avoid accepting their harsh rejection. However, this use of escapism to avoid the pain of loneliness ultimately does not mend all of the narrator’s emotional wounds. A reexamination of the four key words from each repetition of the chorus echoes this fact, as the first three words—“loving,” “wanting,” and “dreaming”—are

emotional concepts that the narrator has struggled with, but in the end, the final word—“crying”—reveals to the listener that the persona cannot fully escape the anguish they feel, and therefore finds that their dreams cannot mask the pain of rejection, and ultimately, reality, forever.

“Hoping That You’re Hoping” addresses the topic of rejection in a similar way. In this duet, Charlie and Ira Louvin combine the themes of love, acceptance, and rejection to tell the story of unrequited love. This song, like “When I Stop Dreaming,” details the narrator in a lovesick state over the rejection of the unnamed object of their affections. They fall back upon a series of remembrances over the beloved and fantasizes over the couple reuniting. The speaker is evidently still struggling with this turn of events and claims that they feel like their existence is now “just a crazy dream,” interspersed with their longings for the other character (2). The frequent daydreams of the couple’s past activities cause the persona to retain their feelings of possessiveness long after the actual split from their love interest, and they state freely that they continue to hope that their love will return to them. The thematic elements of “Hoping That You’re Hoping” are similar to “When I Stop Dreaming” —and indeed show similarities to most of the Louvin Brothers love songs—but there is one key difference in the outcome. While the narrator mourns, this song’s lyrics include the possibility that the rejection may not last forever, creating a slightly more hopeful prospect for the suitor than the one found in the previous song.

Like “When I Stop Dreaming” and “Hoping That You’re Hoping,” “I Wish You Knew” takes the topic of a failed relationship and similarly discusses the rejection and longing for fulfillment that it elicits within the main character. In this song, the relationship has ended at the insistence of the narrator’s significant other, despite the speaker’s great resistance. Relatively little is known about the reason the couple separated, but the chorus offers the statement “you let

another beat my time,” which suggests that the persona has been bested in the race for the beloved’s affections (7). The first verse states that “if only half the things were true you said about my heart” that the narrator could have moved on from the toxic relationship without issue, but instead is wrestling with the knowledge that the person in question made hurtful accusations (8). Despite the pain of being misconstrued, the narrator relates their longing for the other character, claiming that they cannot sleep for the knowledge that their love is with another (18). The final verse, which is directed at the unrequited love interest, seeks to clarify the assumptions that they have about the narrator and primarily discusses their loneliness after the couple’s split before stating once more their constancy of affection in the chorus.

The distrust between the couple, while seemingly aimed towards the beloved rather than the persona, may under closer examination be more complicated than initially perceived. Despite the song’s detailing the relationship, there appears to be valuable information withheld from the listener. The beloved is depicted as the one who is able to voice their feelings and their hurt towards the speaker; meanwhile, the speaker struggles to right the situation afterwards and cannot do it for the regret that consumes them. As well, the speaker states that the unnamed object of the speaker’s affections vividly sees the persona “in another’s arms the way I’ve been with you” and cannot sleep at nights (21, 27). This vision may allude to the fact that the narrator has guilt over the way they handled the relationship. It therefore must be considered that the narrator may not be telling the truth about the couple’s history and may have in fact been guilty of cheating, as there is no denial from the speaker that the cheating happened to extinguish their beloved’s doubt. Regardless, the song clearly shows the abandonment and feeling of rejection that the speaker feels after the two characters’ separation. The great reliance the song’s persona places upon their significant other proves to be detrimental in “I Wish You Knew,” as well as in

two additional Louvin Brothers songs, “Are You Teasing Me” and “I Can’t Keep You in Love with Me.”

The Louvin Brothers’ 1958 hit “Are You Teasing Me” presents a picture of an unsteady relationship between the narrator and the object of their affections. Even though the couple’s relationship is “still young,” the main character struggles to feel certain of their beloved’s feelings towards them (23). Throughout the song, the speaker asks the titular question repeatedly through a series of varying scenarios. Each verse’s inquiries tackle specific scenarios that the narrator wishes to clarify (such as “you say that my kiss sends your heart in a whirl” and “you tell me my love could make your life complete”) (9,17) which consistently center around the statements which the other character has made, but what appears to be truly troubling the main speaker is their lover’s actions rather than their words. In each of the repeating choruses, the question is asked “are you untrue when I’m not with you / when we’re apart are you free” which shows that despite the potential confirmation that the beloved could give the speaker, the speaker ultimately does not trust them (21-22). However, the issue ultimately stems from the singer’s insecurities and their realization that without their beloved—whom they see as the manifestation of their own self-worth—they long for fulfilment.

“I Can’t Keep You in Love with Me” follows a similar structure as “Are You Teasing Me” in that it depicts a narrator who seeks acceptance and fulfillment through another’s love, but struggles to feel as if they have indeed obtained it. The speaker begins with describing the beloved’s heart, using the simile of a “wall of memories” from their sad past that is causing them to feel distanced within the relationship (4). The persona spends the rest of the piece trying to break down this barrier which the song’s object has set up to protect them from future love and as they perceive it, eventual future rejection. While the two do have romantic chemistry and the

object of the main character's affections states their attachment to them, the narrator ultimately feels that they cannot keep the other person from straying. Like "Are You Teasing Me," the character feels inadequate as a result, but instead of succumbing to their feelings, pleads "let me repair your broken heart" to win back their wayward love, effectively placing themselves in the role of fulfilment (12).

Both "Are You Teasing Me" and "I Can't Keep You in Love with Me" follow similar plot lines, and likewise borrow themes with "I Wish You Knew." The lack of context within the relationship causes the listener to hear only the narrator's viewpoint, which does little to establish which party is at fault. There is a great deal of suspicion of the unknown other, who the persona in "I Can't Keep You in Love with Me" fears is lying about them to their beloved (10). However, while they state their fear of this individual preventing their beloved from staying in love with them, there is little explanation of this fact (13). As in "I Wish You Knew," the initial assumption that the singer in "I Can't Keep You in Love with Me" is innocent can be countered with lines such as "There is a way you can repay the one who let you down / Let me repair your broken heart, don't leave it on the ground" (11-12). When taken into context with the theory that the narrator is in fact the one who "let down" the target of the song and is pleading for another chance, the suspicion of the beloved towards the main character is justifiable. Likewise, "Are You Teasing Me" details the doubting narrator questioning the constancy of affection that the secondary character shows them ("Are you untrue when I'm not with you / when we're apart are you free") but with the introduction of the concept of the narrator as unfaithful, the song becomes an insistence for attention in their suspicion (5-6).

Finally, "When I Loved You," released in 1960 on the album *My Baby's Gone*, rounds out the selection of rejection-themed songs with still a different perspective. The speaker in this

song describes a relationship with an unnamed secondary character, to whom they address their comments to for the duration of the piece. The speaker reminds this individual that although they once had feelings for them, they “turned [them] away from the door of [their] heart” (2). This event, while painful at the time, has proven to be rather ironic to the speaker, as their “darling” only later has realized the depth of their feelings for the persona once they have found another (4). While the persona details this former flame’s attempts to reunite and rekindle their relationship throughout the song, even suggesting that the narrator cheat on their current wife to pursue an affair, the speaker flatly refuses their previous lover and rejects the character once more.

“When I Loved You” is unique in that it provides both the perspectives of the character who is rejecting and the character who is rejected. The speaker has endured the pain of being rejected before, but unlike the individuals in songs such as “I Wish You Knew,” they have accepted the refusal and moved on to find a new love. While the narrator in “When I Stop Dreaming” hopelessly embodies sorrow, and the main character in “Hoping That You’re Hoping” offers optimism that the two former lovers may be reunited after offering constancy of affection, “When I Loved You” varies in that it shows the final stages of emotional recovery. The persona claims that their new marriage is a happy one, and freely admits that their new spouse does not make their heart “ache,” unlike their previous love (9). However, the secondary character, who is shown to be envious of the new couple’s happiness, refuses to leave the narrator alone, sending messages through acquaintances and pleading with them for secret meetings (6, 11). Nevertheless, the main character’s own rejections do not soften their heart towards this schemer, as the persona argues that they would only plant doubt in their mind about their willingness to cheat on this new character if they executed the plan to commit adultery (12-

13). In the case of “When I Loved You,” the narrator’s tale teaches that the act of rejection may in fact end happily if one is able to overcome the initial pain from the event. This series of three songs shows the healing process that can take place after the initial act of rejection, from grief, to denial, to acceptance.

The topic of rejection surfaces in various ways within the subgenres of the Louvin Brothers’ secular and sacred music. In the previous chapter, many of the analyzed sacred songs fit satisfactorily within the thematic discussion of religious acceptance and reformation. Interestingly, each of these songs can also be examined within this proposed frame of rejection. In “Are You Afraid to Die?” the line which states “Would you to God’s bosom fly?” is answered with the stanza-ending statement “God will hear your cry,” assuring the listener that God will not reject a sincere and repentant heart (6, 8). “There’s a Higher Power” similarly depicts the Lord as One “who’s faithful and refuses none,” and urges sinners to “believe on him who rests on high...unless [you] do, [you]’ll surely die” (2, 12). “There’s No Excuse” shows the goodness that God provides if one rejects their previous lifestyle, as does “Satan and the Saint.” Finally, “Satan Is Real” similarly praises God’s goodness but also warns of the dangers of sin with its lines “It’s sweet to know that God is real” / “But sinner friend, if you’re here today / Satan is real too,” exhorting the listener to reject evil (30, 34-5). In each song, Charlie and Ira Louvin also make two distinctions about this concept of rejection: firstly, that an individual who rejects their sinful ways and seeks God will find him (the first act of rejection), and secondly, that once this first act is accomplished, God will not reject them from his flock. This contrasts vividly with the countless forms of romantic rejection found in both Louvin-penned songs and covers such as “Must You Throw Dirt in My Face?” “You’re Running Wild,” and “How’s the World Treating You?” in which the chance of reconciliation is unlikely at best. While the duo’s secular



selections present a spurned suitor who is rejected in spite of his faithfulness and love, the duo's sacred songs use the speaker to present a choice that the listener must make—God's mercies, while extended to any person who repents and returns to him, cannot be forced. The audience must choose whether they will humble themselves so that God will not reject them, or in turn, reject God. With the offering of this decision to the audience as one matter that they can in fact control, no matter how many loved ones desert them, the Louvin Brothers were able to weave thematic similarities across subgenres to not only provide a comforting acknowledgement of the difficulties of secular rejection, but also show their listeners a sacred alternative to their search for fulfilment and love. Through the incorporation of the themes of love, acceptance, rejection, worthiness, and forgiveness, Charlie and Ira Louvin were able to not only heal their own emotional wounds through songwriting, but those of their listeners for years to come.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

The final chapter in the Louvin Brothers' history is rife with irony. In August 1963, Charlie, tired of enduring his mercurial brother's temper, informed Ira that they had just finished "the last date [they'd] play together," and after fulfilling their contract to record their final gospel album one month later, the brothers disbanded to pursue solo careers (Wolfe 115). On June 20th, 1965, Ira and his wife Anne Louvin were traveling overnight from Kansas City to St. Louis, Missouri, when disaster struck. A vehicle traveling towards them crossed over into the other lane and totaled the Louvins' car, killing all of the passengers involved (Wolfe 119). The autopsy showed that the driver of the other car that killed Ira Louvin was driving drunk—a tremendously ironic twist after Ira had reportedly telephoned his mother to repent of his alcoholism, even stating that his touring schedule "was the major cause of all his drinking problems" (Louvin and Whitmer 270). Charlie Louvin finished his solo career with twenty singles that hit the Billboard chart within a span of eight years (which incidentally totaled more than the duo themselves had during their prime); he recorded twenty-two albums and 101 singles in total (Wolfe 121). He died January 20th, 2011, after a battle with pancreatic cancer (Louvin and Whitmer 296).

Nevertheless, the Louvin Brothers boasted a tremendously successful career. According to historian Charles Wolfe in *In Close Harmony: The Story of the Louvin Brothers*, the duo amassed a total of 219 commercially recorded songs and a series of eighteen LP albums on the Capitol label during their thirteen-year recording career (120). Charlie Louvin estimates that the brothers wrote approximately 400 songs during their time spent with their three publishing companies (Wolfe 121). The duo received eighteen songwriting awards for their contributions to

country and bluegrass music, and both Charlie and Ira were inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1979 (Wolfe 121).

The legacy of the Louvin Brothers continues to live on in the 21st Century in various ways. The Country Music Hall of Fame inducted the duo in a ceremony in 2001. The organization's museum at the time of this writing features a small exhibit dedicated to the musicians, which holds Ira's 1922 Gibson F-4 mandolin and Charlie's personalized Sho-Bud guitar from his solo career days. The Louvin Brothers also received a posthumous Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2015. As well, legendary Nashville producer Carl Jackson partnered with Ira's daughter, Kathy Louvin, to produce a star-studded 2003 tribute album entitled *Livin', Lovin', Losin': Songs of the Louvin Brothers*. The album featured some of country and bluegrass music's finest singers and songwriters, such as Glen Campbell, Alison Krauss, Emmylou Harris, Johnny Cash, Vince Gill, Rhonda Vincent, Merle Haggard, James Taylor, and Dolly Parton. The recording was nominated for and won the 2004 IBMA Recorded Event of the Year, effectively sparking somewhat of a revival of the Louvins' music. As well, despite Charlie and Ira's deaths, scholars have committed to maintaining their legacies of legendary songwriting and singing. The authorship by Charles Wolfe, Thomas Wilmeth, and Benjamin Whitmer gathered in this thesis speaks to the importance of the Louvin Brothers not only as topics in regional music studies, but also as larger-than-life figures in the world of Appalachian music.

My initial goal in writing this thesis was to combine the analysis of literary criticism with a traditional Appalachian art form. As I documented the Louvin Brothers' sacred and secular music, I found myself with a new appreciation for these musicians' navigation of lyrical content. The thematic bridge between the theoretical gap of traditional American music's sacred and secular subgenres shows Charlie and Ira Louvin's songwriting expertise and unique outlook on

the relatability and accessibility of bluegrass and country music. As well, I found that while Charlie and Ira Louvin did navigate successfully between the subgenres of sacred and secular music, there was still greater significance behind their negotiations of song lyrics. The brothers' situation in a culture that placed such significance upon the portrayal of God as a heavenly Father combined with the imperfections and favoritism shown by their own earthly father suggests a correlation between their own personal experiences and tendencies to write about guilt and regret. The romances in their own lives similarly provided the fodder for songs that spoke to longing and unfulfilled love. As Charlie Louvin alluded to, the composition of lyrics was not merely a pastime for the brothers, but instead was a cathartic release of the experiences that had transpired in their own lives (Waterman). The repeated themes of love, acceptance, and rejection that I found interspersed throughout each of the songs that I analyzed show the songs' importance as not only finely crafted literature set to music, but also as musings and introspections into the lives of individuals who played key roles within musical history.

As such, I feel that my research shows how the songs of the Louvin Brothers are a relevant addition to the study of Appalachian art forms. The use of parallel themes across the traditionally separate subgenres utilizes a perspective in literary criticism that I had not seen applied to Appalachian music, and which I feel contributes a new outlook to the field of regional studies. My hope is that this thesis encourages further examination of the concept of lyrical literary criticism in multiple genres, and that it may bring a fresh inquiry into the complexities of traditional American music. As a traditional music scholar, I have learned a great deal through my research and application, uncovered a new commentary on the ties between Appalachian music, history, and religion, and I have gained a new respect for the act that was "probably the greatest traditional country duo in history" (Louvin and Whitmer 298).

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